



KAY MILLS / Los Angeles Times

Jessamyn West: The Strength of Memory

By Kay Mills

NAPA, CALIF.

Many are the adolescents who have wished their parents were more conventional, and many are the adults who are glad their parents weren't. Author Jessamyn West, for one, is pleased now that the romantic dreamer who was her mother insisted that her daughter be called Jessamyn, not Jess or Jessie; ordered that no teacher tie her left hand behind her back, as teachers did to incipient left-handers years ago, and above all let her children read what they could and wander where they would.

This freestyle upbringing made West resemble the leading characters in her books—*independent women, reflective, unafraid but not unaltered by brushes with death and observant of the plants and animals and especially human nature around them.*

West disputes the notion that women writers suffer any loss of readership or critical esteem by having women as their leading characters. "I'll bet if it were possible for you to find out who the readers are, you'll find a great many more women are buying books, having literary clubs, and that sort of thing than men are.

"Men may be the ones who make many of the publishing decisions, but if women want to read it, you're lucky, because they're the ones that buy the books," West said during a conversation at her home on the outskirts of Napa.

She should know. Turning 81 last Monday, West has just sent off a new novel, "The State of Stony Lonesome," to her publisher. Over the last 40 years, she has published four volumes of memoirs, one book of poetry, seven novels and five collections of short stories, among them "Friendly Persuasion."

West writes from memory. Her own. Her mother's. That of her Quaker religion and of the two regions she calls home—southern Indiana, where she was born, and Southern California, where she was raised in Whittier and Yorba Linda. "My husband thinks I dwell too much on the past. Maybe I do."

Her books, especially her published journals, abound in such pungent observations of the life around her. Many center on travel, which her parents loved:

- "Almost all travel is lost on teen-agers. They are all Byrons for whom scenery is only a background for their own emotions. . . . The young do not discover the world. They discover themselves, and travel only interrupts their trips to the interior."

- "That is one reason travel is difficult. You must constantly leave what you love."

- "Visitors to Los Angeles, then and now, were put out because the residents of Los Angeles had the inhospitable idea of building a city comfortable to live in, rather than a monument to astonish the eye of jaded travelers."

On World War I:

- "A first war is like a first falling in love. Nothing resembling it has been imagined possible."

On two facts of life:

- "Sex and religion are bordering states."

'Westerners who came early enough got to a land that was not yet Southern California. Now the tract homes and things are so close together that you cannot understand, see or appreciate nature, animals, the earth. We will be writing more like New Yorkers as this part of the United States no longer is unique.'

They use the same vocabulary, share like ecstasies and often serve as a substitute for one another."

West isn't given to lengthy analysis of writing or polishing of phrases. "If it doesn't come, it doesn't come." She just does it and forgets about it, which she says is good because she doesn't get hung up on whether she's used an idea before. She does think Western writing is changing, though.

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Will films record contemporary culture better than books? West, who wrote the screenplays for "Friendly Persuasion" and "The Big Country," once told director William Wyler that movie-making "might be for the 20th Century what cathedral building was for the Middle Ages. I don't say that 'The Bowery Boys' or 'The John Philip Sousa Story' are the equal of Burgos and Chartres and Canterbury, but the making of a movie is, as was the building of a cathedral, one activity in which many persons work together to produce a record of the lives of men and women, even though it may be a miserable and flimsy and superficial record."

On the face of it, she says now, "it would seem that to depict the response of human beings to each other would be more clearly, more easily, more vividly shown not by words but by the human beings themselves on film. It seems as though if a movie were rightly made, it could be more effective in revealing to the onlooker, to the audience, what went on there inside those people, what they were trying to do than words would be or sentences.

"But then there is never going to be a motion picture of Thoreau, is there? That's got to get to you. The words have to do it."

Author West dies at 81 after stroke

Nixon cousin wrote recollections of her 25 years in Orange County

By Donna Davis
The Register

Jessamyn West, who conquered tuberculosis a half-century ago to become a best-selling author known for vivid recollections of her childhood home in Yorba Linda, died Wednesday of a stroke in Napa, Calif. She was 81.

Her first book, "The Friendly Persuasion" — a collection of stories based on Quaker life in the backwoods of Indiana, where she was born — was published when she was 43. The book later was made into a movie starring Gary Cooper.

Miss West, a cousin of former President Richard Nixon, also wrote an article on her observations of Orange County during her 25 years here. It appeared in The Register's 75th anniversary issue of The Legacy, a special commemorative book published for subscribers in 1980.

"Yorba Linda was not the land we had dreamed of back on the banks of the Hoosier Muskatatuck," West recalled in the prologue. "It was more beautiful."

In 1910 her father, Eldo West, pitched a tent on the highest hill in Yorba Linda. He then nailed together a two-story home that commanded an idyllic valley vista and faced defiantly into the Santa Ana winds. The house reportedly was torched by an arsonist and burned to the ground in 1982.

After attending Fullerton High School and graduating from Whittier College, Miss West married Harry McPherson, a now-retired Napa school superintendent who survives her.

She taught for four years in a one-room schoolhouse in Hemit and began work on her doctorate in English literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

It was then she discovered she had tuberculosis. She was confined in a sanitarium for two years. After being sent home to die with friends and family, West picked up a pen and launched a writing career that led her to national acclaim.

West also wrote "Cress Delahanty," stories about a girl's growing pains; "The Massacre of Fall Creek," "Except for Me and Thee" and "The Life I Really Lived," a novel that takes an independent writer from life in the Mid-West to Southern California in the heyday of faith healers.

Many of her manuscripts are in the Jessamyn West Room at Whittier College.

In an interview with The Register at age 77, Miss West said she still was as excited by the romance and humor of language and dialogue as she was at age 26, when she went to "find herself" in London.

"If you want to write, write," she told writing students at UCI the next year.



Jessamyn West
"If you want to write, write"

Friday, February 24, 1984

Jessamyn West, Author of 'Friendly Persuasion,' Dies

By KAY MILLS, Times Staff Writer

Jessamyn West, a soft-spoken, contemplative woman who survived tuberculosis 50 years ago to become a best-selling author, has died in Napa, Calif., following a stroke. She was 81.

Best known among her books was her first, "Friendly Persuasion," published when Miss West was 43 and later made into a movie starring Gary Cooper. The book actually was a collection of short stories based on tales of Quaker life in southern Indiana that Miss West's mother had told her as she was nursing her back to health.

Miss West, a distant cousin of former President Richard M. Nixon, also wrote "Cress Delahanty," stories about a girl's growing pains; "The Massacre of Fall Creek," a fictionalized version of the first trial and execution of white settlers for killing native Ameri-

cans; "Except for Me and Thee," like "Friendly Persuasion" a novel about southern Indiana Quakers, and "The Life I Really Lived," a

saga that takes an independent-minded writer from her early life in the Middle West to Southern California in the heyday of faith healers. In 1976, "The Woman Said Yes," a memoir about her mother's death and the suicide of her cancer-ridden sister, was published.

Harcourt Brace will publish her latest book, "The State of Stoney Lonesome," this summer.

Miss West, who died Wednesday night, once said she always wanted to write. However, she never said a word about it to anyone, neither her parents nor her teachers as she was growing up in Yorba Linda, Calif., where her parents moved from the backwoods of



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Indiana when she was 7.

"I thought that you probably had to look up and see a halo on your head if you could write. I had no sign except that I was mad about reading and mad about writing."

Her illness changed all that.

After attending Fullerton High School and graduating from Whittier College, she married educator Harry McPherson, a retired Napa school superintendent who survives her, taught for four years and started work on her doctorate in English literature at the University of California, Berkeley. Just before her oral examinations, she discovered that she had tuberculosis and was confined in a sanitarium for two years.

"I was sent home to die with my loved ones, but my loved ones weren't too keen on the idea of having a loved one dying there."

Her Quaker mother told her stories to keep her interested in life, then cajoled and bullied a bit when that failed. As she started to recover, she also started to write.

"I've wondered what would have happened if I hadn't been sick. I would have gone on and gotten my doctorate, and I would have been a professor. Would I then have written?" she said in an interview last summer.

Keen Observations

Miss West's books, straightforwardly written, were filled with keen observations, with which many readers could identify but might never have had the precise words to say themselves. She acknowledged her stylistic debt to Henry David Thoreau.

"Just look at his sentences. They have a directness. But I suppose a lot of building manuals are terribly direct and clear and concise. It's something far more than that."

It may have been, as a critic once said, that Miss West wrote openly about hidden things. Her books were often "a revelation of the examined life."

She relished solitude and observed that "alone" was a "word sweeter than muscatel to a wino."

"The prohibition against drink was a sometime thing. The prohibition against solitude is forever. A Carry Nation rises in every person when he thinks he sees someone sneaking off to be alone. It is not easy to be solitary unless you are born ruthless. Every solitary repudiates someone," she said.

These are the aphorisms of a veteran journal-keeper, a process she began when she was 12. Many of these journals have also been published, including "Hide and Seek," "Double Discovery" and "To See the Dream," in which she discussed her experiences as a scriptwriter and consultant during the filming of "Friendly Persuasion."

West identified the lure of journal writing as "a means of drawing out venom that would otherwise fester and poison . . . as a therapist's couch, where, without charge, one can make known by listening to oneself what the trouble is." But she was under no illusions about the process, writing, "Many writers have kept journals. The greatest have not done so. The greatest were able because of their talent or energy to put all of themselves in their narratives."

When, last summer, her publisher was considering issuing more of her 50 or so journals, she told an interviewer she did not think her life was all that interesting.

"I mean, I'm not Virginia Woolf. I don't have associations with noted and wonderful people, and also I'm not losing my mind (although I've certainly had about as much sickness as she did)."

She summed up her feeling about writing in an entry in "To See the Dream." Writing, she said, "is so difficult that I often feel that writers, having had their hell on Earth, will escape all punishment hereafter. At other times . . . I fear there'll be no heaven for us: What joys can equal the writing of seven pages—which I did today . . . —or this room and the pen and ink with which to relive the day."

Jessamyn West best known for

books on her childhood

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